



From far Formosa the island, its people and missions (1900)

George Leslie Mackay

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George Leslie Mackay (1844 – 1901) was the first Presbyterian missionary to northern Formosa (Qing-era Taiwan). He served with the Canadian Presbyterian Mission. Mackay is among the best known Westerners to have lived in Taiwan. In 1871 Mackay became the first foreign missionary to be commissioned by the Canada Presbyterian Church (predecessor of both the Presbyterian Church in Canada and the United Church of Canada), arriving in Taiwan on New Year's Eve, 31 December 1871.

After consulting with Dr. James Laidlaw Maxwell Sr., a medical doctor serving as a Presbyterian Church of England missionary to southern Formosa (1865), Mackay arrived at Tamsui, northern Formosa in 1872, which remained his home until his death in 1901. Starting with an itinerant dentistry practice amongst the lowland aborigines, he later established churches, schools and a hospital practicing Western biomedicine. He learned to speak vernacular Taiwanese fluently, and married Tiu Chhang-miâ known as "Minnie" in the West, a Taiwanese woman. The churches he planted later became the Northern Synod of the present Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. In 1896, after the 1895 establishment of Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan, Mackay met with the Japanese Governor-General of Formosa, Maresuke Nogi. Some families in Taiwan today, particularly of lowland-aboriginal Kavalan ancestry, trace their surname ('Kai' or 'Kay') to their family's conversion to Christianity by Mackay.

Mackay's "From Far Formosa" is considered an important early missionary ethnography of Taiwan and an important contribution to the anthropological understanding of the culture and customs of the people of Taiwan during that period. Mackay himself was as fascinated by the cultures and habitat he found as he was disapproving of native practices he viewed as idolatry.

The Taiwanese language first entered written form in the nineteenth century when Mackay and his colleagues adapted the Latin alphabet to render it phonetically. The orthography, called *Pe̍h-ōe-jī* (POJ), meaning "vernacular writing", was used by the Presbyterian missionaries and became standard in the indigenous Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. The first printed newspaper on the island was a church bulletin in Taiwanese. The Presbyterians continued to use Taiwanese in their services and communications even in years when pressure from first Japanese and then Chinese authorities was intense in suppressing public use of the language.

Although Mackay had suffered from meningitis and malaria, he eventually died of throat cancer on June 2, 1901 in Tamsui. He was buried near Oxford College (now Aletheia University) in Tamsui, Taiwan; more specifically, his grave is in a small cemetery in the eastern corner of the Tamkang Middle School campus, where his own son was buried next to him.

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